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XI.—THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE.¹

To propose to consider the construction of an ideal or standard undergraduate curriculum, even to the extent only of tentative approach, must seem, at first thought, rather rash and even a bit foolish; the attainment of any satisfactory result seems extremely difficult, and the result promises to be useless when attained. Yet when we consider in connection with the undergraduate years the vast number of the works of English literature and the great body of knowledge concerning them, the question must inevitably arise, What out of all this great mass of material should be presented to the undergraduate? in what order, and by what methods should it be presented? Again, when we consider that the undergraduate years are but a single stage in the educational life, with distinct limitations, with other stages before and after, and that the curricula of these other stages, especially the secondary school period, have recently been the subject of much discussion having for its aim the construction of a standard or ideal curriculum, it does not seem impossible that some profit may come from such a discussion as that proposed. If it be true that that which has not been treated ought to be treated, then there is ample justification for the choice of this subject. If one may trust the evidence of pedagogical literature this particular subject has not been treated to any great extent. A somewhat careful examination of pedagogical bibliography has failed to disclose a single title bearing directly upon it, and my pedagogical colleagues are unable to refer me to any. To rush in where even pedagogic angels fear to tread surely

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gives promise of folly; the rashness of the attempt may pardon the folly. With a full appreciation, then, of the difficulties in the way, but with confidence that there are among us idealists to maintain that what is theoretically true must be practicable, provided the means can be found, I venture upon some consideration of the question, What material out of the great field of English literature, including works of literature, history of literature, and criticism, can best be given to the college student in the several years of his undergraduate life?

In the search for fundamental principles upon which to base an attempt at determination it is natural to distrust one's individual effort; it is very easy to consider as fundamental what is in fact only secondary, and to overlook important essential modifications. I present then tentatively as the two chief considerations that should govern in the determination of material and mode of presentation: 1. The nature of the subject; 2. The educational aim or purpose of the subject. Omitting any general discussion of these considerations as applicable to the whole college curriculum, let us consider at once their bearing upon English literature.

1. *The nature of the subject.*—In defining the nature of a subject the chief consideration is to be given to those characteristics or properties peculiar to it; characteristics that it has in common with other subjects are of but secondary importance. The position of any subject in the college curriculum is justified by what it has peculiarly its own, rather than by what it has in common with other subjects; and the principal aim of instruction—not the sole aim, but the principal aim of instruction—should ever be to impart its peculiar element of culture. Now there is almost universal agreement that literature is an art. The study of literature is then, primarily, the study of an art,—not the study of history, not the study of philosophy, not

the study of science. What, now, is the peculiar thing that art has to offer? What in art is the supremely important thing? Here I think that we shall find general agreement that the peculiar, the supreme thing that art has to offer is not generalization, not speculation, not information, but the individual work of art itself. In science the individual phenomenon has no importance except as a manifestation of a general principle. In art the individual phenomenon is all important; it may be the manifestation of a general tendency or movement, it may be one of many expressions of the same idea or feeling, and an understanding of the general movement and comparison with other expressions may be necessary to its complete interpretation, nevertheless, its interest, its chief human value lies in itself. In the study of the art of literature, then, the thing of supreme importance is the interpretation and appropriation of the individual work of literature.

If this presentation of the matter may seem to place too much emphasis upon the *chief* object of the study, and to overlook other *important* objects, it may be well to look upon it from another point of view. Literature may be studied as phenomena, or it may be studied as something to be appropriated, to serve as intellectual and spiritual food. Much of the study of the history of literary movements and of the development of literary types is primarily a study of phenomena. It must, of course, be based upon interpretation of works of literature, and is, in its turn, an indispensable aid to complete interpretation and appropriation, but its primary object is generalization, scientific or historical. Interpretative study, on the other hand, has for its primary object appropriation. It may call to its aid all knowledge of sources and influences, of general movements and tendencies, and of development of types, but its main purpose is not generalization.

2. *The educational aim or purpose of the subject.*—I pass now to a brief consideration of the general aims of the undergraduate study of English literature. Without attempting to be exhaustive or logical, I state these as follows: 1. To impart to the average undergraduate the peculiar element of culture to be gained from the interpretation and appropriation of the best works of English literature, and to teach him the principles and practice of literary interpretation. 2. To prepare teachers of English literature for secondary schools. 3. To train specialists for graduate work.

This statement recognizes three fairly distinct classes of pupils: specialists, teachers, and those students who elect work in English literature as part of their undergraduate course. The last class is by far the largest and the most important; it is the most difficult to attract and the hardest to hold; the results attained with students of this class are generally the least satisfactory. The problems involved in their instruction are considered the most difficult to solve. In any attempt, therefore, to construct an undergraduate curriculum they should receive the first consideration, and courses should be adapted mainly to meet their needs. In what follows attention has been given almost solely to students of this class.

I pass now to a consideration of the present state of the undergraduate curriculum. What is offered here is based upon an examination of the curricula found in the latest catalogues of thirty representative institutions: eight private foundations, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Princeton, Cornell, Stanford, Chicago, Northwestern; thirteen state universities, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, Kansas, Texas, California; seven New England colleges, Bowdoin, Dartmouth, Middlebury, Brown, Williams, Amherst, Wesleyan; and two

western colleges, Beloit and Colorado. It may be objected that any inferences based upon the evidence of college catalogues must be untrustworthy in a high degree; accuracy has never been a striking characteristic of these publications. The conclusions that have been drawn, however, are of such a general nature that the probability of serious error is not very great. A wrong interpretation may have been given in some individual cases, but the number of these is not large enough to invalidate inferences concerning general conditions and tendencies.

The courses have been grouped under the following heads:

1. General and introductory courses.
2. Courses on periods and movements.
3. Courses on literary types.
4. Courses on individual authors.
5. Miscellaneous small groups.
 - a) Literary criticism and interpretation.
 - b) Poetics, metrics.
 - c) Foreign influence, foreign literature in translation, English Bible.
 - d) Teachers' courses.

Although this classification is a rather rough one, it will be recognized, I believe, as a natural one. The assignment of an individual course to a group is in some cases a matter of difficulty, owing to the small amount of information given, and even when the statement seems to characterize the course plainly, there is the possibility that in the actual giving of the course the emphasis is not that indicated by the statement. For example, a course called *The Predecessors of Shakespeare*, may put the emphasis upon the works of individual authors and not consider the development of the drama; again, a course called *Wordsworth and Coleridge* may put the emphasis upon the Romantic Movement.

In the first group, general and introductory courses, have been put general survey courses on the history of English literature, courses introductory to the study of literature, and courses in American literature. Nineteen institutions have the general survey course, ten have the course introductory to the study of literature, and five have both of these courses. Of the whole number of institutions (30), then, 24 have either one or both of these courses, and 6 have no general introductory courses. Two universities have two courses in general survey, and one has two courses introductory to the study of literature. It is to be noted here that the general survey course is much more common than the course introductory to the history of literature; there are 21 of the former and 11 of the latter.

In American literature, 29 courses are given in 25 institutions. Twenty-two of these are general survey courses, two are on New England writers, one on the South, three on special study of a few writers, and one on significant movements. The prevalence of the general survey course is to be noted.

In the second group, courses treating periods and movements, there are 135 courses. There is, of course, much variation among institutions in the number of these and much variation in their length; the length generally varies in inverse ratio to the number. The smaller colleges have few, the large universities many, so many, in fact, that one might be led to expect that, with money and men enough, the periods would be shortened to a decade.

Next to be considered are the courses on the various literary types. Of these there are 87, distributed as follows: drama 30, novel (or prose fiction) 20, epic 4, lyric 6, ballad 5, metrical romance 1, essay 7, biography 2, letter writers 1, miscellaneous (better classed here than elsewhere) 11 (prose 6, Arthurian legend 4, periodical literature 1). The drama

and the novel, with a total of 50 courses out of 87, seem to have received very full treatment, while the epic, with but 4 courses, appears to have been neglected. Many of the courses in this class, perhaps the majority, treat the historical development in English literature of the type under consideration, and some trace this development in other literatures as well. Such courses are, in their nature, very much like the courses of the preceding group, those on periods and movements.

The next group I have called individual authors; it is not, however, confined to courses treating only one writer, but includes also all those in the announcement of which several authors are named, without any statement concerning a period or the development of a type. It is probable that some of the courses classed under periods or types belong here. Such courses are sometimes rather closely confined to the study of a few representative writers, and the study of these may be as complete as that given in courses where several individual authors are named.

The total number of courses in this group is 85, distributed as follows: single authors, Shakespeare 35, Chaucer 14, Milton 8, Browning 7, Spenser 3, Tennyson 3, Beaumont and Fletcher 1, Bacon 1, Coleridge 1; groups of two, Chaucer and Spenser 1, Tennyson and Browning 1, Shelley and Keats 1, Shelley and Wordsworth 1, Carlyle and Ruskin 1, Arnold and Newman 1; groups of more than two, 4. Forty per cent. of these courses are on Shakespeare, nearly sixty per cent. are on Chaucer or Shakespeare, and 70 out of the total of 85 are confined to *six* authors, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Browning, Tennyson.

The following points may be of interest. Courses in Shakespeare are given in 25 of the 30 institutions, and in six of these more than one course is given. The 14 Chaucer courses are all given as courses in literature; in only two

cases is a knowledge of Anglo-Saxon required. For some reason, Browning study seems to thrive best west of the Hudson; of the seven courses enumerated all are given in state universities of the Middle West; in one of these a half-year is devoted to select dramas and a half-year to *Sordello*.

The last group, miscellaneous, need not detain us long. Ten institutions have courses in literary criticism with a total of twelve courses, four of which, or one-third, are on the history of English literary criticism. Nine universities have special courses in poetics, metrics, versification; two have courses on the theory of poetry. Courses treating foreign influence are given in four places. Foreign literature in translation is studied in four courses of varying nature,—Great Books, Greek and Latin Classics, Greek Drama, Dante in English. To these may be added nine courses in the English Bible, given in six institutions. Eight courses for teachers are given in as many state universities; these are, however, general in their nature, not confined to literature.

I give now a brief summary of the results of this investigation as far as they concern the four principal groups of courses: 1. General Introductory Courses, 2. Courses on Periods, 3. Courses on Types, 4. Courses on Individual Authors.

1. General Introductory Courses. There are 21 courses on the General Survey of English Literature, 11 courses on Introduction to the Study of Literature. On the subject of American Literature there are 22 general survey courses and 5 more special courses.

2. Courses on Periods and Movements. The total number here is 135. There seems to be a tendency to multiply courses of this type.

3. Courses on Literary Types. The number of courses in

this group is 87 ; 30 of these are on the drama, 20 on the novel, 4 on the epic, 6 on the lyric.

4. Courses on Individual Authors. Total number 85, 40 per cent. of which are on Shakespeare, and nearly 60 per cent. on Shakespeare or Chaucer ; 70 out of the 85 are confined to six authors, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Browning, Tennyson, Spenser.

It is to be noted that group 1 (general courses) has much in common with group 2 (periods and movements) ; the general survey courses generally differ from those on periods only in the extent of time covered. In order, then, to get the whole number of historical courses, we must add to the 135 of group 2 the 21 general survey courses on English literature and the 22 courses of the same type on American literature. This will give a total of 178 historical courses. But, further than this, a large majority of the courses on literary types (group 3) are historical in their nature, *i. e.*, they treat the *development* of the types to a greater or less extent. For example, several of the courses classed under the novel are courses on prose fiction, some of which begin with the Elizabethan age, and others much farther back ; courses on the drama, also, in the majority of cases, are concerned with the history of its development. It is evident, then, that there is a rather close relation between courses of this group (literary types) and those of group 2 (periods and movements). It would, of course, misrepresent the actual state of the case to put these two groups together under the head Historical Courses ; nevertheless, in making up the total number of courses chiefly historical in character, we should add to the 178 courses of groups 1 and 2 a majority of the 87 courses in group 3.

We have seen that the 85 courses on individual authors are confined, for the most part, to six writers, and chiefly to Shakespeare and Chaucer. A comparison of this group with

the courses mainly historical in character brings out clearly the fact that the latter predominate very strongly in the undergraduate curriculum. It would be wrong to base any exact quantitative determination upon the figures presented here; the classification is too rough and uncertain; nevertheless, when all due allowance has been made, it is plainly evident that in the present undergraduate curriculum history of literature holds the chief place, historical method prevails, the main approach to authors is through literary history.

Perhaps it may be well to turn aside for a moment to consider some of the influences that have shaped the present curriculum. What I have to suggest here applies, for the most part, only to the larger institutions.

The first influence to be considered is the training of teachers. In the case of teachers the results of university training are to a certain extent visible; points of strength and weakness are made prominent by iteration. The inspection of secondary schools in connection with accrediting, and the unceasing agitation for better work in English literature in these schools, have constantly impressed upon university instructors the necessity of adapting material and methods to the training of teachers. This influence has been good in so far as it has made undergraduate work more definite and effective; but it has been bad, I believe, in so far as it has tended to magnify the importance of this class of students, and to divert attention from the needs of the much larger class that want English literature for its own sake rather than as a part of professional equipment.

A much stronger influence than the training of teachers is the influence of graduate courses. Even a superficial examination of catalogues will show that no definite principles govern the distinction made between undergraduate and graduate courses. One of the largest universities opens to

graduates all but one of its very large number of undergraduate courses; another offers but six undergraduate courses, all the others are graduate; a western state university does not credit as graduate work *any* course open to undergraduates. The ordinary curriculum groups its courses under the three familiar heads, "Open to undergraduates," "Open to undergraduates and graduates," and "Open to graduates." The second (open to undergraduates and graduates) is generally by far the largest class. In many cases one cannot help feeling, as he looks over courses in this group, that they are, for the most part, courses wholly undergraduate in character, which should not be open to graduates (for credit) and courses wholly graduate in character, which should not be open to undergraduates. In some institutions the number of graduate students is as yet rather small, and the number of strictly graduate courses that can be offered is consequently not large. The number of men ready and eager to give advanced courses is generally comparatively large. In order to get students for such courses it is necessary to open them to undergraduates; and thus it comes to pass that some courses graduate in nature are brought into the undergraduate curriculum.

A third influence is that coming from the nature of the research work done by members of the instructional force. In these days of what one of my colleagues irreverently calls "frenzied research," when publication is the indispensable condition of promotion, it is not to be wondered at that the principal interest of many university teachers lies in investigation. If the field be English literature, the subject will almost inevitably be concerned with the history of literature rather than with interpretation and criticism. A natural consequence of this is to magnify the importance of the historical point of view, to give undue weight to details, to over-emphasize sources, influences, movements; to look

at literature as phenomena rather than as material for appropriation.

Another influence closely associated with the preceding, and perhaps not to be clearly distinguished from it, is that coming from special knowledge of certain subjects by instructors. The desire to impart one's special knowledge is very natural; to impart it is to clarify one's own perception of it. Then, too, such special courses exemplify the great doctrine of academic freedom (*Lehrfreiheit*) and shed glory on the curriculum. Again, if the applicant for permission to give such a course is oppressed by the burden of much theme work, it seems a labor of mercy to grant his request. Thus it comes about, now and then, that courses wholly unsuitable for undergraduates throw the curriculum out of balance and proportion.

Thus far have been considered the general principles that should govern in the shaping of the undergraduate curriculum, the present state of that curriculum, and some of the influences that have shaped it. There remain to be presented some questions that arise when we come to apply these principles to the construction of a standard or ideal curriculum.

In the discussion of principles in the first part of this paper the attempt was made to derive them from a consideration of the nature of the subject and of its educational aim or purpose. It was found that the characteristic, unique, supremely important thing that the study of literature has to offer, is the interpretation and appropriation of the best works of literature; that the chief aim of undergraduate courses is to help the average student (not the teacher or specialist) to interpret and appropriate some of these works, and to teach him the principles of literary interpretation, in order that he may be able to appropriate others for himself.

If, now, these fundamental considerations are well grounded, it follows that our undergraduate courses should be *chiefly* courses in interpretation. This interpretative study, as it advances in breadth and intensity, should naturally involve more and more of the historical element, not so much for its own sake as for the sake of a more perfect interpretation. To give the first place to courses in interpretation is not to exclude from the curriculum courses chiefly historical in character. Such courses will have an important place, for the study of the history of literature has its peculiar element of culture, different from that offered by the study of political, economic, or social history, or the history of philosophy. The popular objection to such courses is that the vital things of literature are neglected and sacrificed to the acquiring of facts concerning its history. This objection is no more valid against the historical study of literature than it is against all other historical study. It has great force, however, if historical courses are given the most important place in the undergraduate curriculum, and if such courses are the only ones offered to students that wish but one, two, or three courses.

This brings us naturally to the question of the introductory course. Our examination of present curricula shows that the more common type of introductory course is the general survey of English literature. Now, if the considerations advanced above are true, the introductory course should rather be one that has for its aim to teach the elements of interpretation, and to apply them to certain masterpieces. The class in the introductory course is generally a large one, containing students of different degrees of culture and with a great variety of tastes and interests. This fact suggests the advisability of grouping in small divisions students of like tastes and interests, and, as far as possible, adapting the material presented to the

character of each division. It may be objected that it is not advisable to make any *one* course prerequisite to all others. If this objection seem a serious one, it may be suggested that instead of one course of this type there be offered three or four courses on individual authors or groups of authors, in each of which the principles of interpretation are taught indirectly through the study of their works; any one of these courses to be prerequisite to all others. The problem of the introductory course is too large and difficult to be treated adequately here; both time and wisdom are wanting. The discussion held in this section two years ago called forth many valuable suggestions, to which, no doubt, much will be added in the discussion to-day.

However this problem may be solved, there will remain the question of the succession or gradation of the remaining courses. One of the effects of the free elective system has been a tendency to abandon to a greater or less extent a gradation of courses, and this tendency seems to have been strong in English literature, perhaps from the nature of the subject. According to the published curricula of some English departments it appears to be possible to elect almost any of the remaining courses after one prerequisite course has been taken. This tendency I believe to be a bad one. It seems to me that much undergraduate teaching loses efficiency by the presence in the same class of students of widely different degrees of maturity and of widely different degrees of advancement in the pursuit of the study. This cannot be wholly avoided, and any narrow, rigid line of advancement is not advisable; as far as possible a variety of courses should be open to the student at each stage of his progress. I believe, however, that we should go so far as to group courses according to the four years of undergraduate

life and require students to make progress through these groups and not over them.

Should undergraduate courses be limited in number? The natural answer to this, I am sure, will be a rather strong negative. Still, it may be worth while to consider whether such a limitation would not eliminate some of the special courses better adapted to graduates; whether teaching would not gain in efficiency if the effort of a department should be concentrated on a smaller number of courses; whether, finally, we should not have more constantly before us the question, What subjects and methods are best adapted to meet the needs of undergraduate students?

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